

More-Inclusive Partnerships

US Pacific Command's Engagement Strategy Aims At Encouraging Neighbors To Work Together



Two years ago, US Navy Admiral Dennis C. Blair moved into the top job at the joint-service United States Pacific Command (PACOM). From his headquarters at Camp Smith, HI, Blair commands US military activities throughout an area of some 110 million square miles—52 percent of the earth's surface.

On any given day, PACOM's 300,000 members conduct the nation's defense business from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the United States. About 100,000 of the command's personnel are "forward-deployed" in the western Pacific region, principally in Japan and South Korea. Those forces are backed up by the remaining 200,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines in the command, most of whom are based along the west coast of the US, in Alaska, and in Hawaii.

As commander-in-chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Blair is responsible for US military activities throughout the largest area of operations (AO) of any of the five "warfighting CinCs." While Pacific Command's AO includes a lot of water, it also encompasses five of the seven countries—South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia—with which the US has mutual security treaties. It also includes many others with which the US enjoys strong bilateral relationships.

Those latter countries, along with several of their neighbors, figure prominently in Blair's plans for his remaining two years as CINCPAC. In contrast to the bilateral military training exercises that the US has long conducted with the forces of various countries throughout the region, Blair is infusing a multinational flavor into future training activities.

From a practical standpoint, multinational military training operations are aimed at preparing the region's forces to better cope with the multifaceted demands of local humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, such as those now under way in East Timor. On an intangible level, the multilateral exercises offer equally important opportunities for the region's military forces to interact with each other on professional and personal bases. Ideally, those contacts will help to dispel some of the historical distrust that has long existed between neighbors throughout the region.

"What we're trying to do is build those [bilateral] exercises into more regional, multilateral activities addressing some of the problems of the 21st century that we're all going to be facing together," Blair told *AFJ* during a December interview.



China is the one area that all of us watch with great care. China is going through a massive restructuring of its armed forces to reduce its size and upgrade its technological capability. Frankly, a lot of China's modernization activity is clearly directed toward a Taiwan scenario, which puts it at odds with the United States.

In this regard, Blair said, "We're doing several important things. As we learned in East Timor, the components of a successful peacekeeping operation begin with having a competent headquarters staff that can bring together the various elements in a coalition force. It also helps to have troops that are well trained in their jobs and are used to working together. About every six months, we bring together staff officers from countries that are interested in participating in those operations—the number's up to about 15 now.

"At those gatherings, we present a staff problem to the attendees—it might be a peacekeeping problem or a humanitarian-assistance or disaster-relief scenario—and organize the attendees into staffs. We then run 'table-top' exercises to get the attendees working together. So when there's a contingency in the future, we hope to have a cadre of officers from the contributing countries who are used to working together and know how to work together."

The multinational operation in East Timor brought to light problems at the tactical level, Blair said. "We found in East Timor that we didn't have written procedures covering how to operate at that level." For instance, each participating country had its own unique operational procedures, which created difficulties at the operation's 'seams'—points where forces from different countries had a high degree of operational interaction.

In response, Australia hosted a seminar aimed at developing common tactics, techniques, and procedures that multinational contingents will use during future operations. Those standardized procedures will be exercised this spring in "Team Challenge 2001," which will link several formerly bilateral exercises in a multilateral training operation. The formerly bilateral US-Thai "Cobra Gold" exercise will be the launching point for this initiative. For the second time, Singapore will send a contingent to the exercise, and Malaysia and several other countries are expected to send "reinforced observation teams"—five or six mid-grade officers—to assess the event and prepare recommendations for their national authorities about whether to send troop contingents to participate in future exercises. Eventually, Blair said, other bilateral exercises in the region might be folded into the Team Challenge series "to work on those seams."

"In addition to the Cobra Gold venue, more tactical peacekeeping centers have been set up in Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Philippines," Blair said.

"These are for tactical units to do such things as 'lane training' in basic peacekeeping skills—how to set up a roadblock, how to patrol a sector, how to deal with a crowd.

"For example, last year I attended a multi-platoon training exercise in Nepal that included platoons from Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and from the US' 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii. They went through 10 days of training in tactical peacekeeping skills. That was followed up by a staff exercise in Bangladesh at their peacekeeping center. So we're building a network of officers and troops who have a common operational footing."

In an effort to engender even greater military-to-military cooperation throughout the region, PACOM set up an Internet web site (www.apan-info.com) about a year ago. Visitors to the site can obtain basic information about PACOM's activities and those of the region's other military forces, Blair said. "But in order to go further [into the site] you have to be a member of the armed forces of an Asia-Pacific country. A visitor could be a member of the Philippines armed forces or the Chinese armed forces. It is a web site in which the Asia-Pacific armed forces post information that is of general interest to the other military forces in the area."

For instance, Blair said, the site is used to disseminate information about military conferences, exercises, and other activities. The site also includes links to non-governmental organizations operating in the region. "We're finding new uses for it all the time but, fundamentally, it's a way for us to communicate with all military organizations in the Asia-Pacific region."

ARMS RACE?

Echoing sentiments frequently voiced by the region's political and military leaders, Blair said that the military equipment modernization programs now under way in many Asia-Pacific countries do not constitute an arms race. "I believe that the fears that many expressed in the past about an arms race in Asia were overblown. The 'Asian financial crisis' really set back the spending plans of virtually all countries in the region. As I have watched them emerge from that crisis, I see them spending money on the things that are consistent with their needs to maintain their sovereignty—guarding against threats that they fear and finding ways to fund some of the forces that can cooperate [in multinational operations]."

Furthermore, Blair pointed out, virtually all armies in the region, including those of China and Japan, are being reduced in size. Burma's ground force is a notable exception.

These force reductions are generally viewed as favorable indicators of near-term prospects for regional stability. In tandem with the force reductions, the nature of the major military modernization activities under way throughout much of the Pacific Rim involve programs that support legitimate interests of self-protection rather than offensive posturing.

"There's a lot of emphasis on naval and air technologies," Blair said. "Those countries are simply trying to upgrade their fighter aircraft and trying to replace their navy platforms. By and large, I don't see them



going into qualitatively new areas of military power that pose a threat to their neighbors. Air and naval forces are inherently less threatening to neighbors than is a large army poised across the border. So I think the military trends are consistent with a steady security structure.”

The unrest in East Timor was a wake-up call for many of the region’s military leaders, Blair said. From Australia to South Korea, the importance of

It’s logical, therefore, to expect that significant reductions in the size of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) will, to some degree, increase the likelihood that large-scale acts of civil disobedience might again be seen in the streets of Beijing. But not necessarily, Blair pointed out.

Much of the internal security work previously performed by the PLA has been shifted to the People’s Armed Police program, with the army acting as a backup force, Blair said. “But internal order remains their number-one job, and I would expect that [China’s leaders will ensure that] they have enough forces dedicated to that job before they move on to other things. And I see nothing to question that judgment.”

SHALL WE RETURN?

After a break of about eight years, the US has resumed its exercise program with the Philippines,

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such basic considerations as communications, transportation, and logistics has prompted the region’s forces to reconsider their near-term priorities.

“I see modernization in my part of the world going primarily for a combination of sovereignty-related [defensive] systems, plus the ability to cooperate internationally.”

THE CHINA CARD

China is “the one area that all of us watch with great care,” Blair said. “China is going through a massive restructuring of its armed forces to reduce its size and upgrade its technological capability. Frankly, a lot of China’s modernization activity is clearly directed toward a Taiwan scenario, which puts it at odds with the United States. [The US has consistently] said that any resolution of the Taiwan question has to be done in a peaceful fashion.”

So far, Blair said, China’s modernization activities haven’t upset the military balance between mainland China’s capabilities and those of Taiwan and its principal protector, the US. But, he added, “We watch that area very carefully.”

Analysts have long pointed out that the People’s Republic of China’s large standing army plays a critical role in maintaining internal order within China.

Blair said, but he doesn’t believe US forces will return to their former bases there. Internal problems, ranging from a counter-insurgency to a president under political siege, are foremost on the minds of the country’s leaders.

“But I do see a relationship in which we will be exercising with the Philippines, particularly on humanitarian and peacekeeping missions,” Blair said. “We will have a lot of contact with the armed forces of the Philippines at conferences throughout the area, but [I do not see] a resumption of a relationship that includes a large number of US forces stationed there.”

Continuing on the point of relationships, Blair said that he had recently visited New Zealand, with which the US has only a limited military relationship. The US-New Zealand military estrangement, which springs from New Zealand’s refusal to allow nuclear-powered vessels or nuclear-capable military platforms to enter its territory, has been in place, officially, since 1985.

Although US and New Zealand forces don’t participate in joint training activities, both countries’ forces find themselves standing shoulder to shoulder and cooperating during actual crises. In East Timor, for

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FAR FROM THE US COAST

Considering the formidable military might found in the DoD-managed forces assigned to the joint-service US Pacific Command (PACOM), it's easy for the casual observer to overlook the contribution made by the US Coast Guard to the command's daily operations. But the value of the Coast Guard's role in regional stability operations isn't lost on Admiral Dennis Blair, PACOM's commander-in-chief.

"The Coast Guard is the most important of the armed forces of the United States that many countries in the region routinely deal with," Blair told *AFJ*. "This is particularly true in the big southern Pacific region, where the Coast Guard—with its environmental and fishing responsibilities and search-and-rescue capabilities—is working in areas that are of primary concern to a lot of the island-nations in the south. The Coast Guard also has good contacts with some of the armed forces of other countries in the region.

"Right now," Blair continued, "the Coast Guard is involved in a search-and-rescue exercise near Hong Kong, and we hope that China will send some units. [We also hope that China] will send some units when the Coast Guard does a search-and-rescue exercise with Russia up in the northwest Pacific."

These activities, Blair said, "are part of PACOM's texture of contact with other armed forces. ...[These activities] help in knocking down some of the misconceptions about each other that we harbor. They're also part of our effort to reinforce understanding through cooperative activities, with the aim of isolating areas in which we are potentially in conflict.

"The Coast Guard has the lead for most of the Joint Interagency Task Force-West's activities, which is working on the Pacific lane of drugs coming up from South America to the United States. Last year, they had a record number of drug seizures along that route. ...The Coast Guard is very much a part of our team, and a good partner in our part of the world." ■

example, the US shares intelligence information with New Zealand's forces. Does Admiral Blair think it's time to reassess the US-New Zealand relationship?

"I had a rather public discussion with the prime minister about the future of the New Zealand armed forces," Blair said. "What worries me about the armed forces of New Zealand is not really so much the nuclear dimension, but that they, in their military planning, have limited themselves to a very narrow definition of a light infantry-peacekeeping force. What I said is that I think they're underselling the capabilities that New Zealand's force has, small as it is, to take advantage of technology to have a more effective force. Also, they're underselling the amount of resources that they can put into defense to have a force that could take more of a leading role in international peacekeeping operations—something more than simply supplying infantry soldiers.

"I think New Zealand really has to decide what its defense-related future should be. Right now, they've limited themselves in what they can contribute. That's something New Zealand has to sort out and then—maybe—we can talk about what our relationship will be."

OPEN ARMS

When US forces left the Philippines, the loss of the naval base at Subic Bay launched the Navy on a quest for alternative facilities. Singapore stepped in to fill the void.

"Those facilities are very important," Blair said. "As you'll recall, we used to have a tremendous logistics-support capability in the Philippines. On the Navy side, there was an ammunition magazine, a supply center, a ship-repair facility, and an airfield—all right together. It was our logistics hub for doing all operations in that part of the world.

"When we left Subic Bay, and the Air Force left Clark [Air Base], that tight, efficient logistics hub really exploded—it was put in other places around the western Pacific. ...But an important piece of it went to Singapore. Now, as soon as the pier there is finished, a carrier will be able to come alongside the pier in Changi [Singapore], and a large transport aircraft can land at the Changi Base and taxi down the runway and get right next to the pier to offload or load up the carrier.

"In addition, the small staff that is located [in Singapore] has the ability to flex our logistics, transportation, supply, and ammunition support around that part of the world during any contingency. So Singapore has really picked up a big part of the logistics-support load in that part of the world. Today, support requirements aren't met as much by bunkers and warehouses as they were in the past. They're primarily [defined in terms of] information and access. And Singapore provides both in spades. Singapore and Thailand are the two important countries in Southeast Asia that the United States works with most closely in doing its [defense-related] business in that region."

DRUG WARS

In addition to training with the Thais for humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, US forces are stepping up their assistance to Thailand in its war against illegal drug trafficking (see "Global Watch"). The increased US military assistance will come primarily in the form of additional trainers and stepped-up intelligence support.

"The Thais are tremendously concerned about the methamphetamine shipments that are coming out of Burma into their country," Blair said. "The [Thai] Army has been told to join the fight against this scourge, and the Thai army leadership has come to the United States and requested assistance with this problem. We have responded by redirecting some of the effort that we give to Thailand in terms of training and equipment to that higher priority. It's primarily in the form of support for the border-interdiction effort up in the Third Army region, which is where most of the drugs are coming across the border right now."

US military trainers will work with Thai army personnel who are responsible for stemming the flow of



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drugs across the border, Blair said. Additionally, the US will assist the Thais with merging intelligence data related to activities occurring in the vicinity of the Burma border.

For their part, the Thais plan to redirect some of their Security Assistance program purchases toward equipment that will be used in counter-drug operations. Collectively, these efforts “will make that border a tougher place for the drug-runners to come across,” Blair said. The Thais also recognize the need to reduce the domestic demand for drugs, he added.

KOREAN CONNECTION

Recent signs of a thaw in the relationship between North and South Korea have resulted in several seemingly positive initiatives, including high-level—and high-visibility—exchange visits. The apparent movement toward normalizing relations between the two countries has even prompted considerable speculation about the possibility of a near-term reunification on the Korean Peninsula.

include] pulling the artillery back from the DMZ, thereby removing the threat to Seoul and increasing the warning time [of a potential hostile action]. Right now, there’s a lot of political froth; there’s a lot of big economic planning—that’s what the road and rail corridor through the DMZ are all about.”

Time is the US’ greatest ally in dealing with North Korea, Blair said. Activities aimed at encouraging economic interactions also figure into the equation for



In one of the more positive signs of the North-South embrace, both sides quickly pledged their support for clearing a roadway and a rail line link through the mine-littered demilitarized zone (DMZ). South Korea has nearly completed its share of the mine-clearing operation; North Korea has yet to begin.

Asked whether the recent political overtures in Korea have changed any planning considerations at PACOM, Blair said: “I think the euphoria has outpaced the military reality, a little bit. Saner heads are now realizing that.

“The military situation on the North side hasn’t changed a bit. The relatively modest confidence-building measures that the South has proposed—‘hotlines,’ exchanges of observers for exercises—have been ‘stiffed’ by the North Koreans. They’re not ready to take those steps forward, much less implement the more important confidence-building measures that we need to take. [Those measures

normalizing relations between North and South Korea, as do increasing the range of interpersonal contacts across the DMZ. But until there is solid evidence that a new era has dawned in the relationship between those countries, the Korean Peninsula will remain at, or near, the top of PACOM’s list of potential flash points.

The post-Cold War landscape in the Asia-Pacific region is changing, but, like so many other aspects typical of Asian affairs, change often occurs at a unique—sometimes grudgingly slow—pace. PACOM’s push for more open, more inclusive relationships with military forces throughout its area of operations has become a new catalyst for change throughout the region. In concert with carefully considered political support from the US, PACOM’s military activities in the Asia-Pacific complement regional activities aimed at bolstering the spirit of trust and cooperation that is gradually taking hold throughout the region. ■

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